

Watchful Guardian or Dark Knight? Criminological Reflections on Crime Prevention by Self Help Security Outfits In Metropolitan Benin, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is presently witnessing an upsurge in crime and criminality and unfortunately, its weak criminal justice process has undermined public trust and confidence in the ability of the police to carry out its statutory function. This has created a security vacuum leading to the emergence and proliferation of self-help security outfits as a measure in combating crimes. This study examined the relevance of self-help security outfits against the calls for their proscription. The study utilized the broken window theory in its explanation of the issue of self-help security outfits. The design was exploratory and involved the use of qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. Metropolitan Benin was stratified along the existing twelve wards from where eight hundred and forty respondents were sampled. 24 in-depth interviews from the twelve wards were purposively conducted amongst respondents. A descriptive analysis of the quantitative data collected was undertaken using frequency distribution while manual content analysis was used for qualitative data collected from the field work. Findings from this investigation showed that self-help security outfits emerged as a result of the inability of the police to safeguard lives and property and that proscribing them would lead to severe social consequences. Based on the findings of the study, there is the need to have a federal statute to regulate self-help security outfits and this should define in clear terms the relationship between the police and self-help security outfits and make formal training of the self-help security outfits by the police mandatory.

Key words: Vigilantes; crime; police; criminals; human rights

INTRODUCTION

Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria established the Nigeria police force and charged it with the responsibility of providing security for life and property, in addition to maintaining law and order. While the Police Act (2004) spelt out the general duties and functions of the police to include but not limited to the prevention, detection and prosecution of crimes and criminals.

Recent happenings and activities of criminals seem to suggest that the police lack the capability and skill to effectively carry out their statutory functions. There is an unprecedented rise in the wave of violent crimes in Nigeria with several unresolved murders, assassination and more recently, kidnapping of both men of means and those perceived to have means. The general public has lost confidence in the ability of the police to safeguard their lives and property and have turned to other mechanisms for protection (Obarisiagbon, 2017).

This other mechanism for protection of lives and property has come to be a resort to traditional means of social control and crime prevention. In traditional Nigerian societies, the locals had their own traditional police force which in Benin is referred to as “Ighele”. They were vested with power to arrest offenders and when judgment was passed on the offender, they carried out the execution of the judgment. Modernity has however called for a refinement of the modus operandi of such mechanisms hence, the existence and emergence of self-help security outfits which is commonly referred to as vigilante group, neighbourhood watch and “street gaters”. Although, there is no single federal legislation in existence in Nigeria today that created vigilante group but the Corporate Affairs Commission (C.A.C) requires that all such groups be registered with it so as to supplement the effort of the Nigerian police in its quest to rid the society of criminals.

It would also appear that these self-help security outfits have found succour in Section 12 and 14 (1) of the Criminal Procedure Act (2004). Section 12 states:

“Any private person may arrest any person in a state who in his own view commits an indictable offence, or whom he reasonably suspects of having committed an offence”.

However, Section 14 adds:

“Any person arresting any other person without a warrant shall

“Without necessary delay hand over the person so arrested to a police officer, or in the absence of a police officer, shall take such person to the nearest police station”.

There is the need therefore to examine the works and activities of these bodies with a view to establishing their relevance or others in Nigeria.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The growing crime wave in Nigeria appears unprecedented and has become a nightmare to even the police force that is statutorily charged with its detection and prevention. Adigwe (2013) notes that the persistent astronomical rate of crime in Nigeria is a major concern to all, which is why various attempts have been made by individuals, communities and the state to stem the tide.

A self-help security outfit is one of such attempts that have been made to assist the police in the performance of its duties. In semi-urban and rural areas, youths have always been at the fore front in the formation of vigilante groups whose advent has become a welcome relief. In urban areas, self-help security outfits have become a dominant feature of everyday life in metropolitan Benin City, due to the increased wave of criminalities and inability of the state to effectively discharge its responsibility of protecting lives and property (Chukwuma, 2001).

On his part, Okoro (2007) notes that corruption; the flaws in the criminal justice process and the poor public perception of the police have made people lose faith in the police hence their consequent preference for self-help security outfits in Nigeria.

Street gates mounted by various communities who employ young Hausa boys as security guards are a common sight to behold in Benin City. Majority of these guards are not armed, yet their presence and patrol of the area tend to reduce the rate of burglary and allied crimes.

In spite of the perceived positive contributions of the self-help security outfits in Nigeria, several persons have called for their ban. The arguments have been that their tactics, modus operandi negates the rule of law and in some instances violates the fundamental human rights of the offenders (Amnesty International, 2002 and Human rights watch, 2003). It is interesting to note here that despite the emergence of this self-help security outfits in Nigeria, there are still near daily occurrences of criminal activities. The question that then bothers the minds of the citizens is, have the self-help security outfits lost their steam? In fact, are they in the light of the prevalence of criminalities everywhere in metropolitan Benin City still needed? The study therefore sought to examine the role and effectiveness of self-help security outfits in crime prevention in metropolitan Benin, Nigeria. Against this background, the call for the ban of these outfits was examined to establish if they have merits.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were designed to guide this study:

1. What factors led to the emergence of self-help security outfits in metropolitan Benin City?
2. Have the self-help security outfits been effective in curbing crimes in metropolitan Benin City?
3. What are the likely effects of disbanding self-help security outfits in metropolitan Benin City?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following objectives of the study were derived from the research questions and they include:

1. To examine the factors that led to the emergence of self-help security outfits in metropolitan Benin City.
2. To ascertain the effectiveness of self-help security outfits in curbing crimes in metropolitan Benin City.
3. To determine the likely effects of banning self-help security outfits in metropolitan Benin City?

BRIEF REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A convenient starting point for any discussion on self-help security outfits is to attempt a clarification of the concept. The concept “self-help security outfits” is also commonly referred to as vigilantes, neighbourhood watch, street guard, community and or traditional police (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2004). No matter the nomenclature by which it is identified, it refers to any organized effort by a people to protect their own lives and property. It is a means of social control put in place by a group of identifiable people to enforce the norms of the community as well as maintain law and order. This identifiable people must live in a particular geographical area, neighbourhood or community and share a common value in this instance, zero tolerance to criminality.

Baker (2003) notes that vigilantism is a form of non-state or self-policing which is usually marked by ad hoc method of crime prevention. In Nigeria, this kind of self-policing is most often made up of landlords, landladies,

tenants and influential persons in the area. The coming together is voluntary and the association is usually funded by the financial contributions of those who make up the group.

The emergence of self-help security outfits in crime detection and prevention is not a new social phenomenon in Nigeria. Prior to the advent of the British into Nigeria, one form or the other of self-help security outfits existed in the different entities that makes up Nigeria. These self-help security outfits acted as communal police by maintaining law and order. They enforced the decision of the elders and also were used to arrest and hand over offenders who breached the laws and custom of the society to the elders. In most cases, they of a certain age grade. However, with colonial rule and the attainment of independence, the Nigerian state maintains monopoly of the apparatus for the maintenance of law and order and for preventing and detecting crimes in society. It follows therefore that the legitimacy and right of the state over its citizens can best be upheld only to the extent to which it can guarantee the protection of life and property of its citizens. Therein lies the social contract between the people and the state.

Unfortunately, the state has not lived up to expectation with regards to keeping its own part of the social contract. Crime not only abounds, but the dimension it has taken is quite worrisome as people can no longer sleep with their two eyes closed. There is palpable fear and insecurity in the land. The police appear ill-equipped to meet the new challenges posed by the more sophisticatedly equipped criminals. The citizens are now at the mercy of these hoodlums and in response, self-help security outfits started emerging even though they are largely obscure because, except for the incorporation of the vigilante group of Nigeria (VGN) in 1999 by the Corporate Affairs Commission, there is no federal statute governing their existence. Although some states like Anambra enacted Anambra State Vigilante Group Law (2004), Kano state has neighbourhood watch (vigilante security) group, (2012), Enugu neighbourhood watch law (2006). Little wonder then that, security organizations and or agencies incorporated as limited liability companies are the ones that in some cases supply security guards to communities to man their areas.

Even though the state as an entity has specialized agencies such as the Nigeria Police Force, the Department of State Security Services and the armed forces for the maintenance of law and order, crime is still a thriving business in Nigeria. Nigerians now have to take their destinies into their own hands. Okoro (2007) attributes the rise in self-help security outfits in Nigeria to the fact that people have lost faith in the police due to their inability to either prevent or detect crimes. Scholars like Adegbusi (2009) observed that the rise in self-help security outfits in Nigeria is due to the fact that vigilante groups are important in crime prevention and control and assist the conventional police to control and prevent the commission of crime in the society. His study revealed that self-help security outfits are very effective in crime prevention and detection. In further credence to the role of vigilante groups, Chikwendu, Nwankwo and Oli (2010) note that the role of informal policing structures in crime control is indispensable and they urged that it should be sustained by creating a synergetic relationship between the formal and informal policing.

In spite of the effectiveness of self-help security outfits in Nigeria, there have been calls for their ban because they violate the human rights of citizens and are often overzealous in carrying out their quasi-police functions in the society. In a study carried out by Obeagu (2014) he cautioned against the ban of these outfits. In his view, the ban of self-help security outfits would have untold effects on the general public. He particularly notes that the natural consequence of banning them would be that, a large number of employed persons would be sent back to the labour market with the effect that those who cannot sustain themselves will take their pound of flesh from the same environment as they know its nooks and crannies. It will lead to increase in crime, fear of criminals and more firearms going to unsafe hands as those with firearms previously will not return them.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This study is anchored on the broken window theory which is a criminological theory propounded by Wilson and Kelling (1982). The central thesis of this theory is based on the assumption that the nature of the environment goes a long way to encourage or discourage the commission of crime. This implies that a broken window left unfixed shows a lack of informal social control and cannot adequately defend itself against the activities of offenders. In order not to send wrong signals to offenders in neighbourhood with strong sense of cohesion fix broken windows. This, they do by putting in place a strong means of social control.

Inherent in this theory is the assumption that it is only the community members that can keep their environment safe from the activities of criminals as they live there and know who the would-be offenders are and how to curb their activities. Consequently, the issue of crime can in other words, be handled through effective partnership and collaboration with the police by community members (Ikuteyiyo and Rotimi, 2010).

Explaining self-help security outfits with the broken window theory implies that where there are cracks in the windows of the neighbourhood, the community members are the first to know because they live and observe all residents of the area and are thus, in position to tell who the would-be offenders are. The formation of self-help security outfits in metropolitan Benin City is thus a way of helping to eradicate the “cracks in the windows” of the neighbourhood by collaborating with the formal security organization which the police represent.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study adopted the concurrent triangular design in order to obtain different but complementary data on the subject under investigation. The design chosen to bring together the differing strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses of quantitative methods with those of qualitative methods (Creswell, 2004). From the qualitative paradigm, the descriptive survey design was used. The descriptive survey design was used to collect information that described, explored and helped the study to investigate population based on sampling (Kothari, 2011). For the qualitative paradigm, the in-depth interview (IDI) guide was used since it is a purposeful undertaking by the study which interrogated subjects on a given situation to collect needed information.

The face and content validity of the research instrument was ascertained by three experts in the field of criminology in Nigeria. The research instrument was divided into two sections. Section A dealt with the

demographic characteristics of respondents while section B dealt primarily with the issues involved in the subject under inquiry. The split-half method was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. Reliability coefficient result obtained for the instrument was .95. The data gathered through qualitative technique was content analyzed while descriptive and inferential statistics were used for the quantitative data.

Metropolitan Benin was stratified along the existing twelve (12) wards from were Eight hundred and forty (840) respondents were sampled. While 24 in-depth interviews from the twelve (12) wards were purposively conducted amongst respondents which consisted of police officers, heads of self-help security outfits and Odionweres-heads of the various communities that make up metropolitan Benin, Nigeria. The choice of these interviewees stemmed from the fact that they are very knowledgeable in the subject under investigation.

Out of the eight hundred and forty (840) questionnaires that were administered, eight hundred and twenty seven (827) respondents were returned, found useful and therefore used for analysis. This however represents a return rate of 98.4% and is considered significant. For the purpose of efficiency and thoroughness, two field assistants were recruited and trained. The field assistants were involved in the pre-test of the instruments and also the collection of the required data used for the study

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE (%)
Sex		
Male	582	70
Female	245	30
Total	827	100
Age		
18-27	102	12
28-37	485	59
38-47	92	11
48-57	120	15
58 and above	28	3
Total	827	100
Religion		
Christianity	793	96
Islam	19	2*
A.T.R.	15	2*
Total	827	100
Educational status		
Primary	214	26
Secondary	506	61
Tertiary	107	13
Total	827	100
Marital status		
Married	707	85
Single	98	12
Divorced	22	3
Total	827	100

Source: field survey, 2017

Table 1 indicates that there were 582 (70%) male respondents while the number of female respondents was 245 (30%). This implies that there were more male respondents than female in the area of study. The table also indicates that respondents within the ages of 18-27 years were 102 (12%), those within the ages of 28-37 years were 485 (59%), those within the ages of 38-47 years were 92 (11%) and those within the ages of 48-57 years

were 120 (15%) and those who were 58 years and above were 28 (3%). This shows that majority of the respondents were between the ages of 28-37 years. It further reveals that 793 (96%) of the respondents were Christians, 19 (2%) were Muslims and 19 (2%) practiced African traditional religion. On educational qualification, 214 (26%) of the respondents had primary education, 506 (61%) had secondary education and 107 (13%) had tertiary education. This shows that majority of the respondents had secondary education. For marital status, 707 (85%) of the respondents were married, 98 (12%) were single and 22 (3%) were divorced. This means that majority of the respondents were married.

Table 2: Emergence of self-help security outfits

Factors that led to the emergence of self-help security outfits	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Loss of confidence in the police	141	17
Police inability to detect and prevent crime	136	16
To assist the police because of increased rate of crime	103	13
All reasons stated above	447	54
Total	827	100

Source: field survey, 2017

On factors that led to the emergence of self-help security outfits, table 2 reveals that 141 (17%) of the respondents surveyed considered loss of confidence in the police as a factor, 136 (16%) of the respondents believed the police inability to detect and prevent crime while 103 (13%) were for assisting the police because of increased crime rate and 447 (54%) were for all the reasons stated. The result of this study validates the works of Okoro (2007), Adegbusi (2009) and Chukwuma (2001)

The finding of this study is further supported by the views of one of the interviewees who stated that:

The police do not know what they are doing. People do not respect or like them because they are not doing well at all. That is why I organized the people in this area to form vigilante group so that thieves will not enter our area. (IDI, Male, Odionwere, Ward 2, Benin City)

Collaborating the above view, another interviewee stated that:

Before we started work as vigilantes, people living in this area were constantly harassed, raided and lost valuables to burglars and armed robbers. Police presence was never felt here. We assist the police to do their work because there are too many criminals now in Benin City because of recession. (IDI, Security guards, Ward 5, Benin City)

A landlord commenting on the rise of self-help security outfits captured the situation thus:

The public has lost confidence in the police to protect their lives and property and we believe that these vigilante people can help the police by securing the area for us and also giving information to the police. (IDI, Landlord, Ward 6, Benin City)

Table 3: Effectiveness of self-help security outfits

Would you say that self-help security outfits are effective in crime prevention?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	763	92
No	43	5
Undecided	21	3
Total	827	100

Source: field survey, 2017

Table 3 shows that 763 (92%) of the surveyed respondents agreed that self-help security outfits are effective in crime prevention, 43 (5%) replied no and 21 (3%) were undecided. This implies that majority of the respondents agreed that self-help security outfits are effective in crime prevention. The result of this study further supports the views of Chikwendu, Nwankwo and Oli (2010)

The views of some interviewees on whether self-help security outfits are effective further gives credence to the findings of this study.

An interviewee noted that:

Personally, I believe that but for the presence of the vigilante group, many of us would have abandoned and packed out of our own houses for fear of armed robbers and criminals who turned this area to their operating station before. They are very effective.(IDI, Landlord, Ward 12, Benin City).

A police officer also attested to the effectiveness of self-help security outfits when he observed that:

Except for occasional human right abuses committed by them, they are very useful. We get information and assistance from them from time to time.(IDI, Police Inspector, Ward 8, Benin City)

Table 4: Banning of self-help security outfits

What are the likely effects of banning self-help security outfits?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Increase in crime	187	23
Fear of insecurity among the public	123	15
Arms and ammunition in unsafe hands	106	12
All of the above reasons	411	50
Total	827	100

Source: field survey, 2017

On the likely effects of banning self-help security outfits, table 4 reveals that 187 (23%) of the surveyed respondents considered increase in crime as an effect, 123 (15%) were for fear of insecurity among the public while 106 (12%) agreed that arms and ammunition would be in unsafe hands and all of the above had 411 (50%). This results further gives credence the study of Obeagu (2014) who advised against the proscription of self-help security outfits.

The finding of this study on banning self-help security outfits in Benin City is further validated by the opinion of a tenant who said that:

If they are banned, daily occurrence of crimes will be the order of the day and people will now go back to living in fear of criminals. (IDI, Tenant, Ward 1, Benin City)

Another interviewee simply stated that:

“Some vigilante would never return their guns; they will run away with them and might make illegal use of them”. (IDI, Security guard, Ward 11, Benin City)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed that self-help security outfits are not new in Nigeria and that they existed prior to the advent of the colonial masters. The apparent increase in their use today in metropolitan Benin is attributable to the rising wave of criminality and the helplessness of the police to prevent and detect crimes. Even though evidence exists from this study to the effect that self-help security outfits are vital and useful in the curbing of crimes and as such they should not be banned or proscribed, there are however allegations of citizens' rights being abused and non-applicability of the rule of law. It is in the light of the foregoing that the following recommendations are made, which if considered and implemented would go a long way in crime prevention in Nigeria.

- There is the need to have a federal statute on self-help security outfits in Nigeria. Presently, only some states and local government councils have legalized the activities of self-help security outfits. Without a federal Act, abuse of vigilante groups by states and local government council in conjunction with politicians is inevitable as they could be used to harass, intimidate and subdue perceived political foes.
- It is needful for the authorities concerned to define in clear terms the relationship between the police and self-help security outfits. This can be done by drawing up a memorandum of understanding between them. That way, a formal partnership can be established with none seeing the other as rivals. Where this is done, joint patrol can be embarked on and this would send strong signals to potential criminals. Joint meetings can be held to discuss common problems
- In the same vein, there should be formal training of the self-help security outfits by the police and other resource persons where the art of community policing can be taught. Emphasis should also be placed on the need to be civil and avoid the use of brute force and extra-judicial means in crime prevention and particularly when criminals are apprehended.
- Self-help security outfits are sustained from dues paid by landlords and tenants of the local areas. Some residents of an area at times might refuse to pay up their dues and in consequence, the vigilantes are not paid or paid but not on time. It is suggested that where the statute exists, the payment of such dues should be made mandatory through formal legislation.

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